

## SEMIOTICS AND THE ARTIFICIAL NATURE OF HAPPINESS – WHAT ARE THE MEANING-MAKING EPISTEMIC TRACKS TO SUCCESS?

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### Abstract

The *task* of semiotics is to reveal the underlying processes that sustain different courses of action and to clarify the details and the granularity of such approaches. Three items create the rationale of the present work: (i) worldviews, including self-referencing concepts such as happiness, may be understood as modes-of-use and as *fashions* to be copied and replicated until a new model will turn the present one obsolete; (ii) the construction and creation of such worldviews is as much the product of the dominant thinking, the *zeitgeist*, as well as the individual framing of personal experiences and reflexive learning; (iii) semiotics enables the interpretation of such phenomena, understood as the epistemic positioning, implying a choice of which perspective would be better adjusted to the process of *artificially* creating certain beliefs and convictions, which tend to be naturalised and normalised, and also the inverse process of rejecting and reframing such worldviews.

**Keywords:** meaning-making, epistemology, happiness.

### I INTRODUCTION

Semiotics represents a powerful resource for the interpretation of human cultural artefacts, such as the concept of happiness. Both Saussure (1959) and Peirce (1931) used a theory of the sign to explain human rationality, i.e. how humans escape the apparent absurdity of existence by creating plausible accounts of their existence, their belief systems and their praxis.

“Community implies language, i.e. word use and social practice.” (Nobre, 2011: 27).

Communities are the basic condition for the emergence of signification processes. It is within specific communities that worldviews are created, developed and nurtured.

Certain worldviews structure thought and action. Semiotics is the decoding mechanism for understanding such meaning-making processes, implicitly present in the creation of specific worldviews. Semiotics is the science of the signs and of the sign systems and semiosis is the process itself, the sign in-the-making. Meaning is produced through language use, within the context of participation in social practices.

Consequently, semiotic studies help to explain the workings of culture, fashion, trends and modes of existence. However, it is necessary to go beyond - and behind - semiotics and try to grasp the taken-for-granted assumptions that justify the existence of a multitude of alternatives when referring to human thought and action. Epistemic positioning refers to this multiplicity of alternative routes for meaning-making.

Epistemological concerns, in the present text, are highlighted as alternative routes for making sense of reality. Different schools of thought offer competing, and often conflicting and incompatible, perspectives. Nevertheless, what they have in common, what they share, inevitably, is a promise of happiness.

That is, dominant-thinking - and the structuring of novel worldviews -, has to fulfil two pre-requisites:

- first, it has to fit the individual process of seeking new answers and new meaning-making strategies, which may offer higher levels of satisfaction, of motivation and of gratification, both immediate, through the eureka feeling of making sense of reality, and long term, through horizon expansion and border crossing;

- and, second, it has to be able to expand the signification spectrum of current attitudes and offer new collective unconscious meanings, deciphering mysteries, cracking codes, creating new magic - and new poiesis and techné -, which may sustain new praxis.

In the making, the actual making, the crafts work of constructing meaning, visible in territories, regions and cities, is not the human made environment, or the built equipment, neither the urban planning, the architecture, or the city design, but territories, regions and cities are made of human relationships, constitutive of praxis, of discourse and of utopias. Ideal forms of society, understood as promises of happiness, guide and structure real life events, such as decisions and outcomes, consequently offering the principles and the foundations for human thought and action, both at individual and at collective level.

In the relationship with ourselves, in our interior game of mirrors, it arises as if a mechanism through which one discovers the other, the different, alterity, otherness, in one's self. Whatever is new, totally new, is inaccessible, and we cannot recognize it. It is through successive approximations that all knowledge unfolds. (Nobre, 2011: 27).

The present text addresses three steps for explaining how and why happiness is an optional event, a decision-making process, whereabouts each individual, implicitly or explicitly, identifies the needed requisites that have to be met in order to achieve an assumed to be true stage of happiness, as a self-referencing process. Semiotics identifies and characterises the process of meaning-making; epistemic positioning and epistemic shifts describe the options available in a time-space framework, either accepting and reinforcing or else rejecting and renewing present state of affairs; and then success, results and outcomes are interpreted as a matter-of-fact reality, in the sense that they are taken as a self-evident phenomenon, i.e. it functions, it works, it is effective and productive, therefore, this proves that it is right, this offers undeniable evidence that the assumptions and reasoning are truthful.

## II SEMIOTICS

Sequence and context are crucial because no argument escapes the starting position, i.e. the taken-for-granted assumptions that support a given argument. The term fashion, and the reality linked to the idea of being fashionable, together with the modes of being fashionable, and to the ways and manners, or the customs, that are conducive to such fashion-ability, understood as social conventions and as cultural artefacts, are possible building blocks of semiotics analysis. Semiotics may be understood as a tool for reading reality. “In semiotics, in Saussure’s theory of the sign, it is through difference that new significations are created.” (Nobre, 2011: 27). In this context, fashion is the tip of the iceberg of cultural dynamics. In other words, individual, institutional and civilizational modes of existence, of manifestation and of being, are synthesised in what is taken to be fashion.

Semiotic inputs may include concepts such as granularity, modality and multimodality. Gunther Kress, born in 1940, is an Australian scholar who developed these areas in depth, as an input to social and cultural analysis (e.g., 1985). Information fields, from the theory and ontology of organisational semiotics, was a concept developed by Donald Stamper (1973); this English scholar was born in 1934. And social semiotics and the tradition of systemic linguistics, has been developed by several authors, namely by Rodney Clarke (e.g. 2008).

Outlining the sequence and context of the present text, and the argument it aims at highlighting, it is crucial to link both semiotic and epistemic inputs. The focus is on outputs or outcomes, such as happiness, for instance. The core idea is the decoding process performed by meaning-making, which implicitly involves some degree of

self-denial and the confrontation with desire, desire understood as human's capacity to overcome unexpected difficulties and unfortunate events, and to continuously create new moving targets, together with some kind of narrative of success.

That which is different, new and strange is frequently interpreted as being menacing. The recognition that it is through difference that progress occurs, that it is possible to understand complexity, the web of multiple relationships, of the infinite levels that intersect, whether in an individual context, in a dialogue with one's own self, or in a collective context, of a group, an institution or a society, is constituted as something that implies a learning process and an experience or, better still, a life experience, which runs in the inverse sense of dominant thinking in contemporary societies. (Nobre, 2011: 27).

It is relevant to distinguish between the two main basic orientations of twenty first century semiotics (Nobre, 2010: 18). That is, between Saussure's and Peirce's interpretation of a sign. Saussure uses a binary relationship: the signifier and the signified. And Peirce uses a triadic relationship: the representamen, the object and the interpretant.

In Saussure's sign theory, a sign is an arbitrary relation; and each sign needs to be combined with other signs in order to produce meaning. The signifier, corresponds to sounds, letters or gestures; and the signified, to the image or concept to which the signifier refers.

In Peirce's sign theory, the sign's triadic relation is the basis of the theory of signification. That is, a sign has an inbuilt capacity to create meaning. Each sign develops infinitely in a permanent cycle. For Peirce, the representamen corresponds to the physical sign that is to be interpreted; and it is understood as something that does the representing, being equivalent to Saussure's signifier. In Peirce's terms, the object, is the image or concept, and it is equivalent to Saussure's signified. And the interpretant, is understood as a sign in the mind, as it becomes the representamen, i.e. the sign to be interpreted, as if it were a physical sign, in the next cycle.

In the next cycle of Peirce's sign theory, this interpretation process itself, becomes the "object" to be analysed, as if it were an objective reality, in relation to which, a "name" must be identified, through a particular interpretation process. In the next iteration, the new and last interpretation becomes, once again, a new "object" to be further analysed and interpreted. (Nobre, 2010: 20).

<b>- Saussure's sign theory –</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A sign is an arbitrary relation;</li> <li>• Each sign needs to be combined with other signs in order to produce meaning.</li> </ul>	<b><i>Signifier</i></b>  Sounds, letters, gestures.	<b><i>Signified</i></b>  Image or concept to which the signifier refers.
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<b>- Peirce's sign theory –</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A sign has a triadic relation and is the basis of the theory of signification;</li> <li>• A sign has an inbuilt capacity to create meaning;</li> <li>• Each sign develops infinitely in a permanent cycle.</li> </ul>	<b><i>Representamen</i></b>  The physical sign that is to be interpreted; “Something that does the representing” (equivalent to Saussure's <i>signifier</i> ).	<b><i>Object</i></b>  Image or concept (equivalent to Saussure's <i>signified</i> ).	<b><i>Interpretant</i></b>  “A sign in the mind”; It becomes the <i>representamen</i> , i.e. the sign to be interpreted, as if it were a physical sign, in the next cycle.
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Saussure's and Peirce's interpretation of a sign (Nobre, 2010: 19)

### III EPISTEMIC POSITIONING

Epistemic inputs may come from diverse thought-provoking works. As examples of radical thinking processes, which offer widely plural and differentiating lines of reasoning, there are Llansol (e.g., 1999), Zambrano (e.g., 1987) and Henry (e.g., 1963). Gabriela Llansol, who was born in 1931 and died in 2008, is a Portuguese essayist and poet, whose diversified work includes a critical historical and political reading of reality. Maria Zambrano (b. 1904 – d. 1991), is a Spanish philosopher and a feminist, with a profoundly creative thought, whose work includes the idea of poetic reason, understood as a bridge between mathematical or analytical analysis and symbolic or intuitive insights. And Michel Henry (b. 1922 – d. 2002), is a French phenomenologist and novelist, whose extensive and rich work addresses the idea of life as manifestation and participation.

Considering an organisational context, it is possible to address the influences that are present in innovative areas, such as in the field known as “organisational learning”.

The fashion industry is itself an important example of how management theory may

respond to different contexts. In this line of thinking, it is important to discuss “the different epistemologies behind different strands of management thinking” (Nobre, 2007: 275). Indeed, different epistemic inputs are relevant, including an approach that draws on “(...) social semiotics and on ontological hermeneutics in order to develop an integrative perspective to the individual and to the social dimensions of organizational learning.” (ibid). And moreover: “Pragmatism stands for the inseparable nature of the individual and the collective aspects of learning.” (Nobre, 2007: 275).

Epistemic positions are crafted from contrasting differences, i.e. from comparing and reinterpreting taken-for-granted assumptions. Different worldviews emerge from different epistemic positions.

It is possible to identify two contradicting perspectives in face of that which emerges as being different. On one side, dominant thinking in Western civilization rejects that which is different. In a certain sense, this rejection is linked to a culture of death. On the other side, through non-dominant thinking, arises the praise for life and of that which is different. (Nobre, 2011: 27).

It is at the level of the communities that language and social practices create meaning.

Each community, as each institution, tends to stifle their own dynamism, risking subjugating its own charisma to that which is secondary; the rite tends to prevail in disfavour of openness and transformation. Thereby, the communities themselves are the stage of tensions that may only be solved through the same processes that are common to the context of scientific production or of the evolution of a civilization, that is, through action and through language, action and language as primordial processes of construction of meaning. The praise for difference – alterity, dynamism and transformation – is the adhesion to this attitude or life philosophy, learnt and shared in a community, between one’s own peers. It is confrontation with novelty that renews us. (Nobre, 2011: 27).

“The fundamental question is that we create the illusion that it is through culture that we progress, as individuals and as civilizations, but it is culture itself that represents that which binds us to that which is rigid and falsely fixed.” (Nobre, 2011: 27).

For Derrida, the concepts of “differance” and of deconstruction are at the centre of the processes of meaning-making and of interpreting reality, processes that are always incomplete and provisory. According to Derrida, “nothing exists outside the text” – text interpreted as context, including the concrete situation of language use. (Nobre, 2011: 27).

Subjectivity is constructed through inner dialogues, which interpret and reinterpret the epistemic positions of surrounding environments and of the communities of presence to which one belongs.

#### IV EFFECTIVENESS

Desire and craving for life - life's impetus, dynamism and drive, pure energy -, which makes life worth living, that is the ultimate test for life's worth. Worth is a measure of success. Effectiveness is a transversal concept that may enable capturing the functioning of specific cultural artefacts, from fashion to urban design. This utilitarian and functionalistic perspective serves the purpose of identifying the pragmatics of current practices, i.e. whether social and political choices are being adopted due to their links to successful real or apparent outcomes.

To be more precise, outcomes are always welcome and justified, precisely because they indicate the success of present courses of action. If in doubt, it is necessary to go deeper in the justification process, creating alternative forms of legitimising and offering credibility to the whole process of collective meaning-making. When doubts persist, it is often necessary to wait for the next generation in order to artificially force new readings of reality and alternative ways of thinking and acting.

Consequently, the main focus of the present text is the input-output relationship. That is, how outcomes, results and production, no matter the context, are achieved and made real. Happiness, consequently, may be taken as a *proxy* for life. Being a close substitute - happiness as a proxy of life -, signalling its metaphoric power, indicating that the meanings are similar and that both terms point to the same direction, in an "as if" manner, it is also possible to consider happiness as a proxy of any other self-referencing term. These include intelligence, efficiency, effectiveness, success, perfection, performativity, competitiveness, achievement and sense of fulfilment or of plenitude. Henry's radical phenomenology, in an onto-phenomenological fashion, addresses this ultimate worth of human's power to think and act (Henry, 1963). Core



idea: that life is manifestation of reality, in its full perfection; that manifestation is reality itself; that humans participate in such manifestation process; that anything related to human's existence and to human reality is part of this participation and manifestation process, i.e., in semiotic and epistemic terms, this is a positive, affirmative and optimistic reading of reality.

Decoding, is the constitutive and unavoidable role of semiotics. Semiotics aims at creating meaning-making processes that are both understandable and shareable, enabling human beings to achieve their best potential, both individually and collectively. Considering the signification process, as such, happiness may be taken as an indicator and proxy of construction of meaning in general, i.e. of how humans continuously frame and reframe their relations to reality, adjusting and readjusting their worldviews in an unavoidably semiotic and sense-making process.

Self-denial is intrinsically present because of the open, complex and dynamic nature of meaning. Consequently, wishful thinking and self-fulfilling prophecies are denial mechanisms for avoiding the reality-test of thought and action. Both thought and action reveal one's deepest convictions. However, both wishful thinking and self-fulfilling prophecies are also desirable escape routes for success.

Desire is a critical term because it is desire that accounts for and integrates paradoxical and ambiguous realities, overcoming conflicts and managing tensions in a creative way. Cognitive limitations, contingent factors and human uncompleted drive, represent the frailty of human existence. Therefore, the craving for ultimate perfection, the drive for infinite satisfaction and the need for new answers, consists of a process of completeness and fulfilment as a natural and spontaneous event or happening. Then, the decoding begins. This framing and reframing is unavoidably present in human thought and action, whatever the time-space context.

In other words, it is the psychodynamic process identified by Freud, that once a human being experiences a new and highly satisfactory event, she or he would continuously search for the repetition of that event. The discourse, the language and the justification, in terms of conscious will power, is a latecomer to this process of construction of meaning. First, there is the experience of satisfaction; and second comes the plausible explanation for such satisfaction. For Freud (1913), religion was replaced by reason and science in modern society. The interpretation of religious connections is critical for the understanding of the symbolic content of psychoanalytical theory, which, in turn, is closely connected to Freud's historical and biographic turbulent context (Lacoursiere, 2008).

In synthesis, semiotics is a powerful scientific discipline; it needs to become a taken-for-granted competency and skill for human happiness, e.g. for global citizenship; i.e., semiotics literacy is the fastest route for social and human growth and development; peace and happiness are constructed realities that emerge from human behaviour; thought and action are there at the service of whatever becomes fashionable, trendy, attractive and desirable. And this is a self-referencing process, a creative tension and a virtuous circle for human success, both individually and collectively, in a micro scale, of communities and face-to-face contact, and in a macro scale, considering civilisations and their life cycle, their renewal and their perishing. When civilizations die, it is culture that collects the leftovers and creates the birth of a new era.

Communities are a critical dimension of meaning-making processes. "For Peirce, the essence of scientific knowledge is nurtured through the dialogue within the scientific community. It is the discussion among peers the best criterion for validating and for improving the process of scientific creation." (Nobre, 2011: 27).

And communities of meaning are inherently communities of life. “In life also, it is through the community, the different communities of life, that it is possible to progress in the sense of amplifying, deepening and intensifying the exploration of the maximum significations and the full potential of reality.” (Nobre, 2011: 27).

## V CONCLUSIONS

Happiness may be taken as an indicator and proxy of meaning-making in general, i.e. of how humans continuously frame and reframe their relations to reality, adjusting and readjusting their worldviews in an unavoidably semiotic and meaning-making process. Wishful thinking and self-fulfilling prophecies are denial mechanisms for avoiding the reality test of thought and action. Both thought and action reveal one’s deepest convictions. However, both wishful thinking and self-fulfilling prophecies are also desirable escape routes for success. Cognitive limitations, contingent factors and human uncompleted drive and desire, represent the frailty of human existence. Consequently, positive forms of subjective alienation are both desirable and efficient in the process of contributing to human’s growth and development. The role of semiotics is to aim at creating such processes understandable and shareable, enabling human beings to achieve their best potential, both individually and collectively.

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